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Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

# **Prevention in Middle School Matters: A Summary of Findings on Teen Dating Violence Behaviors and Associated Risk Factors Among 7th-Grade Students**

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**  
**MARCH 2012**



## Summary of Findings

Teen dating violence and abuse is a major public health problem in this country. The consequences go beyond undermining young people's individual growth and academic potential; dating violence and abuse puts young people at risk for long-term health consequences, serious injury and even death.

**Prevention in middle school matters.** Teen dating violence behaviors and associated risk factors are prevalent among middle school students in this study. At the same time, the study highlights protective factors that can be strengthened to reinforce positive norms and promote healthy relationships.

In this evaluation study conducted by RTI International (RTI) on behalf of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and Blue Shield of California Foundation, the findings reveal that not only are many of the 7th-graders in this sample dating, they also are experiencing dating violence. Additionally, teen dating violence is not happening behind closed doors. More than one in three (37%) students surveyed report having witnessed boys or girls being physically violent to persons they were dating. The study also found that, while some attitudes and behaviors that are associated with increased risk for teen dating violence are common and even pervasive, nearly three-quarters of students reported talking to their parents about dating and teen dating violence. Parent-child communication is a protective factor that can decrease risk for teen dating violence.

*Teen dating violence behaviors and associated risk factors are prevalent among middle school students in this study.*

This summary reviews the key findings from the baseline data collected from a paper-and-pencil survey of 1,430 7th-grade students from eight middle schools in diverse geographical locations. The study sample is not nationally representative.

RTI International (RTI) is conducting an independent evaluation of *Start Strong: Building Healthy Teen Relationships* (Start Strong) from July 1, 2009 to June 30, 2013. The evaluation employs a quasi-experimental design that includes four Start Strong intervention schools and four comparison schools. The evaluation is supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and Blue Shield of California Foundation.

This report covers the first wave of data (baseline) collected in fall 2010.



## BACKGROUND

More than one in three women and more than one in four men in the U.S. have experienced rape, physical violence, and/or stalking by an intimate partner in their lifetime.<sup>i</sup> The highest prevalence of intimate partner violence and sexual assault is among young people ages 16 to 24.<sup>ii</sup> Unfortunately, teen dating violence is a reality for many high school students. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), nearly 10 percent of high school students nationwide reported being physically hurt by a boyfriend or girlfriend in the past 12 months.

*Start Strong: Building Healthy Teen Relationships* (Start Strong) is a national program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation in collaboration with the Blue Shield of California Foundation and Futures Without Violence (formerly the Family Violence Prevention Fund). It is one of the largest initiatives ever funded targeting 11- to 14-year-olds to promote healthy relationships and prevent teen dating violence.

The Start Strong model utilizes innovative program components to: 1) educate and engage youth in schools and out of school settings; 2) educate and engage teen

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influencers, such as parents/caregivers, teachers and other mentors; 3) change policy and environmental factors in school and communities; and 4) implement effective communications/social marketing strategies to change social norms.

There is limited information about teen dating relationships and prevention programs targeting middle school students. The Start Strong evaluation is one of the few studies, and one of the largest, to look in-depth at the dating relationships of middle school students.

## **Start Strong Evaluation Study—Key Baseline Findings**

### **MANY OF THE 7TH-GRADERS IN THIS SURVEY ARE DATING AND EXPERIENCING DATING VIOLENCE.**

- 75 percent of students surveyed report ever having a boyfriend or girlfriend.
- More than 1 in 3 (37%) students surveyed report being a victim of *psychological dating violence* in the last 6 months.
- Nearly 1 in 6 (15%) students surveyed report being a victim of *physical dating violence* in the last 6 months.
- Nearly 1 in 3 (31%) students surveyed report being a victim of *electronic dating aggression* in the last 6 months.

### **TEEN DATING VIOLENCE IS NOT HAPPENING BEHIND CLOSED DOORS.**

- More than 1 in 3 (37%) of students surveyed report having witnessed boys or girls being physically violent to persons they were dating.

### **ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIORS THAT ARE ASSOCIATED WITH INCREASED RISK FOR TEEN DATING VIOLENCE AND ABUSE ARE PERVASIVE.**

- Nearly 2 out of 3 students surveyed (63%) strongly agree with a harmful gender stereotype, such as “with boyfriends and girlfriends, the boy should be smarter than the girl.”
- Nearly half of students surveyed (49%) report having been a victim of sexual harassment in the past 6 months, such as being “touched, grabbed, or pinched in a sexual way” or that someone “made sexual jokes” about them.

### **PARENTS HAVE AN IMPORTANT ROLE TO PLAY IN PREVENTING TEEN DATING VIOLENCE AND ABUSE.**

- Nearly three-quarters of 7th-grade students surveyed report that, in the last 6 months, they “sometimes or often” talk with their parents about dating topics such as, “how to tell if someone might like you as a boyfriend or girlfriend.”

## **KEY INSIGHTS**

**Prevention in middle school matters.** There is a critical window of opportunity to teach young adolescents about healthy relationships and prevent teen dating violence. Middle school is also a key time for parents to educate themselves about these issues so

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they can help their children navigate new dating relationships (both online and offline), including what is healthy and what is not.

Teen dating violence behaviors and associated risk factors are prevalent among middle school students in this study. At the same time, the study highlights protective factors that can be strengthened to reinforce positive norms and promote healthy relationships.

While there is a growing body of knowledge on teen dating violence among older adolescents in high school, we need to better understand this younger age group and how best to promote healthy relationships and prevent teen dating violence in middle school.

These early relationships can set the stage for the future. Studies have shown that being the victim of child abuse and/or adolescent dating violence is highly predictive of intimate partner violence among young adults.<sup>iii</sup>

Rather than repairing the damage later on, parents/caregivers, teachers and communities can help equip young people to develop healthy relationships throughout their life. Prevention needs to be a priority.

## **THE EVALUATION**

The independent evaluation of Start Strong is being conducted by RTI International (RTI), one of the world's leading nonprofit research organizations. The purpose of the evaluation is to assess the overall impact of the Start Strong initiative by measuring differences in dating violence behaviors and risk factors between students at the Start Strong intervention schools and the comparison schools. The evaluation is a longitudinal quasi-experimental study in which data are collected from the same students at multiple time periods. The final results of the outcome evaluation will be released in fall 2012.

## **METHODOLOGY**

RTI International (RTI), on behalf of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and Blue Shield of California Foundation, conducted the study. The data were collected through paper-and-pencil questionnaires in one class period in fall 2010.

The sample source consisted of all 7th-grade students (except those in self-contained classrooms) in four Start Strong intervention schools located in Los Angeles, CA; Bridgeport, CT; Indianapolis, IN (2 schools) and four comparison schools located in San Diego, CA; Saginaw, MI; and Indianapolis, IN (2 schools). Efforts were made to identify comparable schools based on race/ethnicity, gender and percentage of free or reduced lunch students. Study recruitment of 7th-grade students took place at each participating school. Parental consent and student assent was attained. The student participation rate for this study was 57 percent (range from 44% to 71%).

The sample for this evaluation study is not nationally representative. The sample size was 1,430 students. The mean age was 12 and 50 percent of participants were female. The demographics of the sample were 30 percent African American, 24 percent White, 34 percent Hispanic and 12 percent other.

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## **ABOUT THE ROBERT WOOD JOHNSON FOUNDATION**

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation focuses on the pressing health and health care issues facing our country. As the nation's largest philanthropy devoted exclusively to health and health care, the Foundation works with a diverse group of organizations and individuals to identify solutions and achieve comprehensive, measurable and timely change.

For 40 years the Foundation has brought experience, commitment and a rigorous, balanced approach to the problems that affect the health and health care of those it serves. When it comes to helping Americans lead healthier lives and get the care they need, the Foundation expects to make a difference in your lifetime. For more information, visit [www.rwjf.org](http://www.rwjf.org).

## **ABOUT BLUE SHIELD OF CALIFORNIA FOUNDATION**

Blue Shield of California Foundation, one of the largest healthcare grantmaking organizations in California, has committed over \$46 million since 2002 to ending domestic violence in the state. For more information, please visit the Web site at [www.blueshieldcafoundation.org](http://www.blueshieldcafoundation.org). The Foundation was formed by Blue Shield of California, a not-for-profit corporation with more than 3.4 million members, 4800 employees and more than 20 offices throughout California. For more information about the company, please visit [www.blueshieldca.com](http://www.blueshieldca.com).

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i Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey: 2010 Summary Report." Atlanta, GA: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, November 2011.

ii Rennison C. "Intimate Partner Violence and Age of Victim, 1993-99." Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report, October 2001, revised November 2001.

iii Gomez, A.M. "Testing the cycle of violence hypothesis: Child abuse & adolescent dating violence as predictors of intimate partner violence in young adulthood." *Youth & Society*. 43: 171-192, 2011.

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